THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

For the Arab world, "the 1990s are economically more promising than the end of the 1980s," says Tayseer Abdel Jaber, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). He bases his assessment on positive trends in the region. "The 1990s will bring improvements," he adds. "There are better prospects for oil prices and production. The demand has improved, prices have improved, and this will be reflected in the economic activities.

"There is also an increasing interest towards regional co-operation, through the establishment of regional co-operation councils. There have been many agreements on economic co-operation among member States, such as the one concluded in February 1989 between Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Yemen that created the Arab Co-operation Council," Jaber says.

Another regional grouping, the Gulf Co-operation Council, was set up in 1981 by six Gulf States. The unification of the two Yemens to create the Republic of Yemen in May 1990 is another stride towards further regional collaboration.

Jaber, an economist and a former Minister for Labour of Jordan, has been head of ESCWA since February 1989. This newest of the United Nations regional commissions was set up by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1973. Its members are Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Headquartered in Baghdad, Iraq, the Commission has a staff of about 310 and a budget for 1990-1991 of $42 million. It also receives extrabudgetary funds from Governments, regional bodies and United Nations agencies.

The region ESCWA serves is culturally homogeneous, its countries sharing the same Arabic language and civilization. Oil production is still the engine of the economy, but successful diversification efforts are under way. Five member States are among the major oil-exporting countries in the world, and the region is endowed with almost half of the world's proven reserves.

Politics deeply influences economic activity. The region has been suffering from a war situation for over 40 years, and it remains a very troubled area. "The conflicts in our region have heavy economic and social consequences," Jaber says. "We underline the role of the United Nations—social and economic—to achieve stability in the region."

The Commission seeks to foster the economic and social development of the region it serves. Its activities encompass 15 programmes, including industry, agriculture, population and development planning. "We are providing member States with studies based on current conditions and prospects of the region," says Jaber. "In addition, we provide advisory services to Governments on issues such as transport, water, statistics, science and technology.

"We have a lead in various areas—population statistics, energy, water, the role of women, science and technology. The programme on women is very active. We have developed a strategy for the region for the 1990s, in co-ordination with the United Nations Development Fund for Women." Some 13 ESCWA projects support the contribution of women to the region's development.

ESCWA carries out several technical assistance projects. "We implement projects in energy, statistics, water resources, population, household surveys and women in development," Jaber says.

For instance, a project in Yemen seeks to enhance national statistical capabilities, and another promotes biogas as an energy source. Other initiatives stimulate industrial entrepreneurship, help control the spread of deserts and promote the use

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of solar and wind energy in the region. Training courses, seminars and workshops are regularly provided to member States.

ESCWA serves as a forum for the region's countries. Governments meet at the ministerial level at the Commission's sessions, and maintain regular contacts through the ESCWA Technical Committee, made up of government experts, and the ESCWA Advisory Body, made up of member States' ambassadors in Baghdad. The many meetings and conferences organized by ESCWA throughout the year help Governments harmonize their economic policies.

ESCWA research produces studies and reports, such as the *Survey of Economic and Social Development* and the *National Accounts Studies*, and periodicals such as the *Bulletin of Industrial Statistics*, the *Population Bulletin*, the *Transport Bulletin* and *Agriculture and Development*.

The Commission seeks to alert member States to the new priorities arising in the region. "It has become imperative for ESCWA to devote attention to issues such as the rationalization of the public sector, the development of private initiatives, the reconstruction of areas destroyed by war or natural disasters and the strengthening of co-operation with Arab economic associations," Jaber says.

Privatization—analysed by a 1989 ESCWA study—is another issue. "There is now a trend towards giving the private sector a greater role in promoting development in the countries of the region," Jaber observes. "The public sector has become inflated, and some of its institutions have become less efficient in satisfying the requirements of development."

ESCWA has initiated and assisted in setting up regional institutions—the Arab Planning Institute in Kuwait, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics in Baghdad, the Arab League Documentation Centre in Tunis and the Arab Urban Development Institute in Riyadh.

It also initiated the creation of a regional network on new and renewable sources of energy, and another on science and technology for informatics and micro-electronics.

ESCWA co-operates closely with the organizations of the region. "We do our best to involve the regional institutions," Jaber says. "We have signed memorandums of understanding to work together with most—if not all—regional institutions: the League of Arab States, the Arab Industrial Development Organization, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and many others. We try to co-ordinate our activities with their work. We see our role as co-operative and complementary rather than individual."

This article is part of a series on the United Nations regional commissions.

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